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INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BEIRUT 000413

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/WERNER/SINGH

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/13/2016

TAGS: [IS](#) [LE](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: MGLE01: AOUN PERPLEXED BY CRITICISM, MAINTAINS HE
HAS MADE HIZBALLAH COMMIT ITSELF

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey Feltman. Reason: Section: 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

[11](#). (C) In a lengthy meeting with the Ambassador and poloff, Michel Aoun expressed astonishment that his February 6 joint communique with Hizballah's Hassan Nasrallah has generated such strong criticism. He was resolute in his belief that the document was actually a significant step forward in his under-appreciated attempt to pull Hizballah into Lebanon's political mainstream. When asked to explain the tortured language of Article 10, which appears to give open-ended license to Hizballah to retain its militia, Aoun argued just the opposite, saying the terrorist organization could keep its arms "only if national consensus allowed it." He then finessed criticism of the communique's statements dealing with Shebaa Farms and the "Israeli threat" by arguing that section was merely a statement of the Government's responsibilities, not a list of conditions that had to be met before Hizballah would relinquish its arms. At any rate, he argued, the document was only a proposed way to move forward, and it could be modified (and clarified, he admitted) when all Lebanon's political factions entered into dialogue. Finally, Aoun expressed deep regret concerning comments he had made several weeks ago that suggested hostage-taking during the civil war was justified -- he recounted how he had worked hard to obtain the release of French hostages, and honored the sacrifices made by Americans for his country. End summary.

[12](#). (C) Michel Aoun, leader of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and aspiring presidential candidate, received the Ambassador and poloff at his home in Rabieh on February 13. Senior advisors Gibran Bassil and Ziad Aabs, who served as Aoun's emissaries in the protracted negotiations with Hizballah representatives, attended the meeting and provided explanation and context for the document's frequently convoluted language.

[13](#). (C) The Ambassador began the meeting with a detailed critique of the document, emphasizing not only the communique's troubling ambiguity and inconsistency, but also the damage it had caused to the international community's hard work in producing a unified UNSC resolution that unequivocally called for the immediate and comprehensive disarmament of all militias in Lebanon.

[14](#). (C) The Ambassador compared the secrecy and lack of candor in the preparation and release of the Aoun-Nasrallah communique with the effort made by PM Siniora to keep all parties involved when he was trying to get the recalcitrant

Shia ministers back to the government. While the USG was not comfortable with some of Siniora's proposals, at least we were not surprised and had the ability to offer comments on the PM's paper (later abandoned). It was also brought to Aoun's attention that while Hizballah demanded consensus on almost any issue it wishes, hardly any mention was made of the glaring lack of consensus when Hizballah decides on its own unilateral action, whether it be participation in the cabinet, or responding to perceived provocation along the Blue Line.

15. (C) But the principal complaint of the U.S., and the rest of the international community which had drafted and passed UNSCR 1559, was the "political cover" the communique appeared to give Hizballah to keep its arms as long as they desired. The Ambassador reminded Aoun that just as Lebanon was finding its voice to question the rationale for Hizballah's state-within-a-state status, the communique had done a good job of taking the wind out of everyone's sails and given the terrorist organization an undeserved gift. If, the Ambassador asked, the point of the document was to help advance Lebanon's transition to an independent democracy, why give this proxy of Syria and Iran an excuse to continue its destabilizing influence.

16. (C) The critique ended with a overarching question: did Aoun really believe that Nasrallah was sincere, and if so, would he actually have the freedom of action to comply with the commitments contained in the document? Lastly, Aoun was asked to explain exactly what he meant when he said in a recent interview that many of the hostages taken during the civil war "were not mere tourists" and had suggested their ordeals may have been somehow justified.

AOUN RESPONDS

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17. (C) Aoun, who glanced often at his advisors during the Ambassador's presentation, took a few moments to collect his thoughts and then responded that he was surprised by the reaction and felt much of it was due to misunderstandings. While his advisor distributed an official version of the communique, Aoun said he had, for the first time, been able to make Hizballah commit itself on paper to exactly what type of country it envisioned. And that vision, argued Aoun, was a country based on a "civil society" (which he contends was a major concession for Hizballah), with defined borders, a strong central government free of corruption, normal diplomatic relations with its neighbors, and free of foreign domination. Aoun insisted this document was a major breakthrough that will eventually force Hizballah to become Lebanese. He said he has no illusion that Syria will not try to influence Hizballah to advance Syrian interests, but the former general said he had countered this threat by making Hizballah respond to developments that took place only within the borders of Lebanon, and not connected to regional developments. He asked his critics to compare these purported achievements to what he described as the inability of the Siniora government to attain even the smallest concession from the politically powerful Shia community.

18. (C) The former general then made the unexpected statement that he believes Nasrallah is genuinely committed to breaking Hizballah away from the Syrian orbit, as well as its Iranian paymasters. When asked to explain his reasoning, Aoun stated it was clear from the approach Hizballah took in the protracted negotiations. Bassil commented that the Hizballah representatives were seriously engaged in each and every article of the communique -- he maintained they fought as hard over national structure as they had over the threat from Israel. Aoun asked: if Nasrallah only wanted an excuse to keep his arms, why would he engage so thoroughly on issues that were outside that domain? Even though the document represented "only a start," Aoun said he was convinced that

the terrorist organization eventually wanted to come in from the cold. In support of his theory, Aoun noted that the document even referred to Israel, not "Occupied Palestine," in describing the location of the former SLA fighters and families.

¶9. (C) Concerning the Byzantine wording of the communique's Article 10, "The Protection of Lebanon and the Preservation of its Independence and Sovereignty," Aoun admitted it may have been preferable to have clearly broken these ideas into their separate components: limits on Hizballah's rights to possess arms; the responsibilities of the Government to protect Lebanon, and lastly, the formulation of a national defense strategy through national dialogue.

BINDING HIZBALLAH

¶10. (C) When asked if the wording didn't effectively create an open-ended excuse for Hizballah, Aoun firmly countered that a careful reading of the text locked in Hizballah with "two bounds": the organization could only keep its weapons if the rest of Lebanon agreed, and only until such time as "objective conditions" (defined by national dialogue) were achieved. At that point in the text, according to Aoun, the focus shifts completely to the responsibilities of the government. These were defined as: the liberation of Shebaa Farms, obtaining the release of "resistance members" (i.e., prisoners) from Israel, and protecting the country from the threat from Israel. When questioned whether Nasrallah and Hizballah's leadership interpret the text in the same manner as he just did -- as consensus could mean that Hizballah could always veto any disarmament desires by the rest of Lebanon -- Aoun and Bassil vigorously affirmed tht this was the case. Bassil argued that the intensity of the negotiations underlined the fact that a sea change was occurring.

¶11. (C) When asked why Hizballah would concede such a significant point (i.e., placing the justification of the resistance in the hands of the entire body politic), Aoun again returned to his belief that this document was a breakthrough and would eventually lead to an integration of Hizballah into a democratic Lebanon. Admitting somewhat the possible remoteness of this happening, Aoun hastily added that Article 10 was only a "framework" that required continuing dialogue with the government and all the communities of Lebanon.

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¶12. (C) Aoun completed his defense of his "breakthrough" by rhetorically asking what was actually being accomplished by constantly attacking Hizballah. Aoun said that his experience over the past several months had convinced him Nasrallah was serious. He re-emphasized that he understood the difficulties, especially the ties that bound Hizballah to Syria and Iran, but he argued that the organization was not going away anytime soon, and his plan was merely a beginning that perhaps could yield highly desired results. He then took one last swipe at the government by asking what else could one do "in the absence of government policy."

MISINTERPRETED COMMENTS

¶13. (C) The former general also responded to the Ambassador's question regarding his recent statements on foreign hostages taken during Lebanon's civil war. Aoun expressed deep regret that his words had caused such concern.

He professed himself to be "America's friend" and said he respected and honored the many sacrifices Americans had made for his country. He related how during the war, he worked hard to resolve French hostage situations. Aoun maintained that he understood the "pain" the situation had caused in America and was sorry his words were "misinterpreted" and

taken out of context. He assured the Ambassador he had "denounced hostage taking before, and he would again."

RETURN OF SAAD HARIRI

¶14. (C) As the meeting concluded, Michel Aoun said he had spoken by phone with Saad Hariri, who had just returned to Lebanon from a six-month absence, and said that Saad would soon be sending a representative to the General's home. Aoun expressed hope that much-needed discussions would soon take place, but he demurred on specifics.

COMMENT

¶15. (C) Aoun seemed mystified, even hurt at times, that the USG was critical of a document that he argued, with seeming sincerity, he had used to corner Hizballah. But, whatever his intentions vis-a-vis reining in Hizballah, we still believe that there was another agenda at work, too. Given Aoun's undisguised unhappiness with Hariri et al., it seems certain that the meeting between Nasrallah and Aoun was also intended to be a blow to the March 14 coalition. After all, Nasrallah was able to settle scores with Walid Jumblatt (intensely disliked by Aoun) over Jumblatt's "betrayal" of Hizballah, and with Sa'ad Hariri and Fouad Siniora for their relationships with the United States and France. In just one meeting, Aoun secured the backing of up to a third of Lebanon's population -- and a key non-Christian bloc -- for his presidential quest. In Lebanon's complicated and sensitive confessional system, Aoun won what would be in practice essentially a Shia confessional veto against any other presidential candidate.

¶16. (C) Even though a week has passed since the Aoun-Nasrallah summit, how this will play on the Christian street, Aoun's primary base of support, remains to be seen. On the one hand, Christians are generally skeptical about Hizballah's aims and worried about Hizballah's state-within-a-state status. Our public questioning of the Aoun-Nasrallah document has given some Christians second thoughts, we understand. Also, some Christians may be disgusted at the unseemly pictures of Aoun joyfully embracing Nasrallah and smiling broadly throughout Nasrallah's press comments. On the other hand, Christians remain fearful and furious over the ostensibly anti-Danish riots on 2/5. The Sunni leaders of Lebanon -- Sa'ad Hariri and Fouad Siniora -- were unable or unwilling to prevent their fellow Sunnis from vandalizing churches and Christian-owned property.

¶17. (C) In contrast to the ugly images of Sunni rioters, a day later, another Muslim leader of Lebanon -- Nasrallah -- showed deep respect for Christians by agreeing to go to a church to see Aoun. As if that gesture was not sufficient to boost Aoun at the expense of the March 14 forces, Nasrallah then hinted publicly that it may be time to see how to bring home the families and fighters of the South Lebanese Army, who are predominately Christian and who have been in exile since Israel's May 2000 withdrawal from southern Lebanon. While we doubt Nasrallah is really prepared for an SLA

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amnesty, the clear message to Lebanon's Christians is that the March 14 majority produced Sunni riots in Christian neighborhoods, whereas Aoun can get the most powerful single Muslim leader to show respect and address a nagging issue of the Christian community. Many Christians, reeling from the 2/5 riots, will no doubt find this message appealing.

¶18. (C) If Lebanon's presidential elections were held today and conducted by popular vote, Aoun would probably win: The Shia, roughly a third of the population are with him, thanks to yesterday's meeting. To get over the 50 percent mark, he would only need to get about half the Christian voters. This is not good news for the March 14 parliamentary majority.

But presidents in Lebanon are elected by the parliament, not the population at large. The 73-member (out of 128 seats total) March 14 majority would never elect Aoun, meaning that we need to watch for calls for early parliamentary elections that could, in the current climate, create a majority that would be a coalition of pro-Syrian and pro-Aoun MPs to parliament.

¶19. (C) As for the document that Aoun and Nasrallah blessed, we note that it contains some of the very language that we had cautioned Hariri and Siniora to abandon when they were drafting language to end the Shia cabinet boycott. With his presidential ambitions overriding any other concern, Aoun appears to us -- but apparently not to him -- that he has given Hizballah a green light to keep its arms for as long as Israel could pose any plausible threat. Whatever he may tell us or believe himself, in practice, Aoun has moved a long way from his earlier support of UNSCR 1559.
FELTMAN